A POSITIVE statement from the Chinese delegation at the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Resources in Hobart raises hopes that consensus on a marine protected area for the Ross Sea could be reached at next year’s meeting.

New Zealand’s foreign minister Murray McCully this morning welcomed China’s statement during the CCAMLR meeting’s closing stages that it could be willing to support the Ross Sea marine protected area (MPA).

The Ross Sea MPA proposal is one of two MPA proposals which have been the subject of intense negotiations at CCAMLR meetings since 2012.

The other proposal, for the East Antarctic region, was not mentioned today.

Mark Epstein, from the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, said both MPA proposals had been stalled at previous CCAMLR meetings because of objections from China and Russia.

He described today’s statement by China as “the first shift of a tectonic plate” and, hopefully, “the breaking of a log jam” that could enable CCAMLR’s 25 member nations, plus the European Union, to achieve consensus on the Ross Sea proposal by next year’s CCAMLR meeting.
Mr McCully also welcomed a statement from the Russian delegation expressing a willingness to work with other CCAMLR member nations on the Ross Sea proposal ahead of next year’s meeting.

“China has moved forward and we hope that Russia has observed that and will follow,” Mr Epstein said.

Bob Zuur, with the World Wildlife Fund, said he was optimistic that China’s change of attitude towards MPAs would also translate into progress in the coming year on the East Antarctic MPA proposal.

Andrea Kavanagh, from the US-based Pew Charitable Trust, said the Ross Sea proposal was a significant advance on the proposal as it stood when the CCAMLR meeting began two weeks ago.

It now includes an Antarctic krill research zone, which would be closed to krill fishing, as well as limited fishing for Patagonian toothfish.

The krill research zone increases the proposed Ross Sea MPA area by about 20 per cent, to about 1.5 million square kilometres.

“We continue to strive for the establishment of an MPA in the Ross Sea. It remains
challenging, but support for the proposal continues to build,” Mr McCully said.